

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise

W.H. Auden

FREE POETRY

Sara Nicholson

Good For Burning

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that hyacinths would cure us
of our love for fire

Convinced of our value
we concoct our metaphors,
lash out at romance
Imagine, though, that this
were not a sentence
but a projector. That what
you're witnessing is not
a flare-up per se, but
the collapse of some abstract
yet devastating trope

There are no stars to diagnose
the wonder we feel when
we look up at them
In springtime muscles'll
grow on the trees
I reach my hands into your
seasonal affective disorder
only to discover that
the night has its idiom,
the insects their paper,
that the sky draws no pictures
we're able to recognize
I suffer from neurasthenia,
the painter's disease, besides
it's not for you to kill me
I have a stomach in my heart

GOOD FOR BURNING

Sara Nicholson

vouchsafe us an outfit
to don in heaven, I'll squat
here in my cradle of dirt

Today, there are no ghosts
maundering on about flowers
(thank god) and the most
romantic act will be
to make a website for you
Tonight, dear reader,
you'll be trapped betwixt
schmaltz and forsythia
The very air will open
when you speak

Poems may be writ naturally
or by caesarean section
I embrace this maxim
as though it were a worm
What little I know
about the history of art
I've summarized as follows:
Lascaux's in need of a gardener
Altamira's a plume of smoke
The swan'll go extinct
b/c the passenger pigeons
have set fire to the earth
A tree apologized for crying,
rued its mawkishness
We were stupid if we thought

A CONVALESCENT'S SUN

The forest housed a dryad
though I figured
the wind would banish it
The economy, ever so secret,
whispered that oak is crueller
perchance than moss
The reader does not sway
but cradles the furniture
when she drinks too much
I'm partial to words
with an X and Y in them—
calyx, possibly sphinx
Our favorite egyptologist
was born in the middle
of the nineteenth century
He drew lines on paper b/c
the rose in its sarcophagus
had yet to bloom

My own lament for fashion
involves not polyester
but muslin, velvet, crinoline
I'm a researcher and I
take fabric from the tombs
A whalebone skirt's as good
as any summa theologica
Though the angels wouldn't

Yet the specter of the witches continued to haunt the imagination of the ruling class. In 1871, the Parisian bourgeoisie instinctively returned to it to demonize the female Communards, accusing them of wanting to set Paris aflame. There can be little doubt, in fact, that the models for the lurid tales and images used by the bourgeois press to create the myth of the petroleuses were drawn from the repertoire of the witch-hunt. As described by Edith Thomas, the enemies of the Commune claimed that thousands of proletarian women roamed (like witches) the city, day and night, with pots full of kerosene and stickers with the notation "B.P.B." ("bon pour bruler," "good for torching"), presumably following instructions given to them as part of a great conspiracy to reduce Paris to ashes in front of the troops advancing from Versailles. Thomas writes that "petroleuses were to be found everywhere. In the areas occupied by the Versailles army it was enough that a woman be poor and ill-dressed, and that she be carrying a basket, box, or milk-bottle to be suspected" (Thomas 1966: 166-67). Hundreds of women were thus summarily executed, while the press vilified them in the papers. Like the witch, the petroleuse was depicted as an older woman with a wild, savage look and uncombed hair. In her hands was the container for the liquid she used to perpetrate her crimes.

—Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*

A TATTOO ON MY LOVER'S ARM

Not English enough to say "whilst"
though I speak the right dialect

I troll the earth for foliage
and add a sequin to my waist

The neighborhood's a silent film
while I ride shotgun

The East Coast needs no axioms
when the smoke appears

My calendar leaves little room
for the burning of corpses

My planner puts me in the forest
a month from yesterday

Your flesh is inked with omens
though I can't quite read them

Crows are your insignia
They look pernicious in the heat

of a garden I don't own, a garden
I rent. I'm convinced that the rose
is flammable. When I set it on fire
with the rest of the garbage, it burns.

GOOD FOR BURNING

The soldiers caught us unawares
as we slept inside the garden.
I have no right to say “we” so I
am disappointed with stones.
We can’t tell branches from landscape
architecture, the sun from a candle
that floods the arrondissement with light.
Whatever those little purple flowers
suppose themselves to resemble
as they climb the fence, they’re vexed
by our enclosures. The grasshopper’s
abstracted from its only act, the hop.
They hit me up at the ATM where
they (the soldiers) know I (the poet)
am most likely to lose my shit.
When the leaves’ve helicoptered down
from that obnoxious tree, the maple,
I’ll fling my roses sheepishly
at the foxholes carved by dawn.
I’ve never been one for falsifying
the thoughts of my superiors.
If I climbed this fence, my landlord
would annex starlings from the lawn.
Now the walls with my extinguisher
draw attention to the fact that
my house is not yet burning. It seems
my purpose is not to wreck anything
but to sleep inside the wreckage

OFTEN I AM PERMITTED TO RETURN TO “OFTEN I AM PERMITTED TO RETURN TO A MEADOW”

As if it were a scene made-up by the mind
of who-the-hell-knows. My mind
looks for those archaeologies that yield
the oldest relics. My instincts tell me
a meadow does not augur the wind.
I’ve put my stock in craftsmanship
but lack the proper tools—a meme
of the grass blowing east against
the source of who-knows-what.
My sources lead me back to a meadow.
My tools have wounded no daimons
though my hammer strikes a fawn.
The stars sans their harmonies
will nonetheless follow the tempo
tradition has allotted them. My mind
hears nothing that my arms and legs do.
The meadow’s put on trial with us as
eyewitnesses, a darkling field for proof.
Alpha has the right to remain silent. Omega
can be used against you in a court of law.

EDDA FOR LARKS

I recognize the onset of morning
from Jupiter's transit. I traded spit
for a kitchen garden and when
the Ozarks failed me, I spoke up.
The field guides all say to me that
birds're as estranged from their labor
as they are from speech.
Typically, the wrens make haste
to form a gauntlet of stars
and they nest there in their anger,
emboldened by capital, let loose
as if the desert were a nook.
So when I find the branches
flowering with metallic petals
I realize that OD'ing on oxygen's
much better than it sounds.
When Williams wrote of Jacataqua,
being racist, he wrote about himself,
not the myth of the indigenous.
His sketch of the princess, not
the princess herself, being beautiful
beyond description. It is 7:22 a.m.

LOVERS OF THE THIRD ESTATE

The trees withdrew their savings
from the wreckage of a bank.
The bank, I mean, the world itself
profits off chlorophyll, the same
as we do. I wonder if I'll die
in my dream tonight, if I'll collapse
from a lack of airflow, a lack of \$
to my lungs. Emphyzema's
a beautiful word to holler at trees
though they will not answer you.
I know that dirt cavorts with worms
in the same way children do.
A four-year-old supposed a fairy
inhabited her bedroom. She held
her pencil like a banker and wrote
in a language only she could read.

HEGEL

A few texts into the symphony
and I'm already wasted.
My cell phone looks like an oboe
with a smaller hole. Moths can
no more flutter over the orchestra
than we can piss on them.
No phantom has my back except
the Spirit of form. It might be
the bottle of wine in the forest
that's helping me to sleep.
It could also be the philosopher
with his portion of snow.

and I think that I am beautiful
and racist, certainly envious of those
who minus a hawser, attempt
to draw the wildlife toward them.
Birds shift from quartet to quintet
when neurons hang in the trees.
Their brains are too simple to tell
holly from ilex, too small for flight.

COUNTRY LANES TO KAFKA

One by one, the children follow me.
I felt Cro-Magnon in the heat.

The leaves, by dint of electricity,
recharge themselves during a storm

though not without trembling.
The autumn says it will fossilize us too.

At vespers, we reverse our growth
and shrink back into childhood.

At midnight, we could not deny
the immortality of the soul.

A wasp's on my head, a mammoth's
behind me, an angel will hibernate

when the lake freezes over.
I saw you lolling in the meadow

but you didn't see me. You looked
so prehistoric with your ferns.

MALTA DONTCHA

It's awkward walking around
with a cheval in my purse.
We called the weather a despot
because it scattered the cobblestones
with leaves. Louis Quatorze
could beat the shit out of Henri
no question. He lives on this island
and has the reflexes of stones.
An intermezzo to ease the boredom
I feel when I look at his portrait.
A bottle of wine for him, my sovereign,
where he sits in need of a song.
I prefer the Compleat Angler
to alcohol, wine to heraldry,
a coat of arms to MSNBC.
One way to find solace is to burn
that hundred-dollar sweater.
One way to scatter your buckshot
is to bury yourself with a gun.

THE PEACHES OF SAMARKAND

New York didn't ask for its weapons.
Rome was not fisted in a day.

To enter the city, I leave behind the ice.
My heart, though, never left my body.

Ice is nothing like music because
it impoverishes what is called "warmth."

We sang of thunder but forgot the idiom.
We buried ourselves in leaves.

The wind leaves hexes in our field of vision.
The ocean lays claim to the particulars.

They said, it makes no difference
whether children are born of the earth

or if they consent to the song we sang
about thunder, forgetting the words.

If the scythe is my instrument, what music
would my children make, if I had any?

What songs would my son write to murder
the city? He has no love for the cello.

What fruit would my daughter offer up
to the king? She crushes her fiddle in June.

RAMON FERNANDEZ

There was a mirror in the provinces
that could imitate the sun
better than those other artifacts
we call "reflective." Just so, a whirlpool
resembles the movement of children
before we eat them. I eat them.
I am an eater of children. I suppose
a certain angle makes this possible
as it makes possible all that is tough
to reconcile with beauty. The way
I see it, the valley isn't concave
nor the mountains convex.
Horses in the fourteenth century
were called palfreys, chargers, steeds
and the people ate them just as
I do their progeny. Either it rained
on the spider, or it will rain on a spider
but not both. We stress our independence
yet most of us would rather yield
to a poem than to the eponymous sea.

GOETHE

It began on my birthday. I wrote out invitations in a neat hand. Then I demanded the aid of my servants, and each of them offered me a gift—Mary her carpet of dead pine needles, Laura her curtains, Melissa her hair. That summer, our house was full of curiosities. I killed a raccoon, and a desolate smell took up residence with us. I almost said “wafted” but that isn’t quite right. Nothing “wafts” except odors, though anything gaseous could conceivably waft. In August, I read the Koran backwards. It taught me to look for the gothic in flowers, and for blood in a very young girl. At this time, my household was surviving on consommé, which my servants and I drank from a bowl made of wood. The broth had a complex flavor. I felt so eighteenth-century when I vomited it up.

THE HUNT

I seldom think of a mountain
surrounded by doves. A window
separates me from the doves as it
separates me from the mountain.
I called the Italians Etruscan
and through their forests, I cut my swath.
I’m all for the woodlands
because not much is poisonous.
I advocate eating **everything** you see.
A gardener produces the wine but
the grapes he never could counterfeit.
I called the vineyard Endymion
because it gratifies the moon.
I’ve a predator in me, you’ve a hunter
in you—the face of an oyster
with the body of a snake.
Hortense was a swag of pearls
and she interiorized it. The feeling
that she had been harvested
by some poet, a gardener perhaps,
from the bottom of the sea.

NICK, BRING ME MY SLIPPERS

I have no thoughts about the night
without the thought of murder.
The night must eat the constellations
and carbon-date the stars.
I have built for myself a nexus
out of wallpaper, constructed it
as a book is usually constructed.
I'm oblivious to our history and
its pages are spoiled and foxed.
When hominids lived on fruit
and barn swallows practiced
their flight through the egresses,
I was building a fortress and we
were not yet at war with the sky.
The trees encourage my howitzer
to keep on destroying them.
Ne travaillez jamais if you're rich
and if not, rehearse well your parables
for the world we've all created
would love to bury you in salt.

THE GARDEN OF MILEY CYRUS

Emptied of its magic, the grass
believes our stories, collapses like blood
into a house we don't remember.
A life we never lived exists in theory,
a house that wasn't was. Example:
I ate the olives for breakfast.
If I could I would look toward you
as toward this bowl of olives
I'm eating, the green ones I've eaten,
the black ones I've always already ate.
Say I hated the songs on your mixtape.
Say tree, philosophy, ghost,
or some other word abused by this poet.
The pioneers placed cobwebs
over their wounds to arrest the bleeding.
I, like them, knew nothing
about medicine so ipso facto magic
became my remedy. Is my medicine.
Later, I found some mushrooms
of the "destroying angel" kind.

OF PRIMOGENITURE AND VIOLETS

Minus punctuation, I get all girly.
The flowers're wandering over the ice.

I've committed myself to everything
I shouldn't commit myself to—

the O of poetry, the omichron that's
ghosted its way toward my stronghold.

The moon will stoop to greet its Lord
at prima nocta, the one whose watchman

is the lily & whose hireling's the sun.
The moon's never not female, for some

dumb reason. The women learned
to read without a cheap ass feuilleton.

Odi et amo, I hate and I love the way
we talk about flowers. We owe nothing

to each other and therefore nothing
to the authors who're not yet born.

with dust from the catacombs while
recalling how to eat properly.

We feasted on ephemera
to remember the names of the dead.

STARS AND THE AGGRESSOR

I've smoked exactly fifty times
more than I should have.

I washed my hammer and felt alive
when I crushed a spider with my boots.

One time, I watched a boy demystify
a blade of grass with his teeth

and under a bunch of hemlock
he buried a picture of the stars

he wanted to bang someday.
If the story of capitalism begins

with the hammer, my secret admirer
would be the hawk. He'd swoop at me

and peck at my skull and beneath
a ravine I'd bury his plumage.

I never took a course in economics
but when I brush your fingers

I brush the dirt. Figured we'd dine here
together on leaves, fill our stomachs

DANTE IN ARKANSAS

I sometimes forget what a radio is
when I'm harmonizing with it.

Kids, they have no memory for the stars.
I've never seen the cliffs of Dover
but I bet they, too, are rednecks.

The world is round but the Earth
looks flat if you squint. I searched
the landscape for inaccuracies
like this, despite the music (hereafter
called "doom") that from the stars
rushes toward me. Kids, they've loomed
and eavesdropped on the spheres.

My tongue's a fog, the source
of all these noises. My breath's
been doomed to harmonize with fog.

COWSLIP'D

You're so busy trying to fuck
your way through the undergrowth
that you've forgotten to draw a map.
A cowslip serves us instead of a hill.
A tulip will help us to remember
the names of these mountains.
I sacrificed a pigeon to the masculine gods
and a rat to the feminine.
The Assyrians lacked enough data
for their cuneiform app.
One flower for my ritual and one reason
to kill it: it dies, I don't. It is beautiful
when the anesthesia wears off.
I have no lack of flowers because
I offer nothing to the gods.
I have no lack of numbers
since it's what's inside that "counts."
What is blood? The fluid of memory.
What is memory? To be smitten by a horn.
And mathematics? To delight
in letting the mind wander.
To offer mercy, in theory, to the sun.

MEN

You've become a Candide, and your arms are the urchin I had
always dreamt would vaporize the stars.

You found the spiders picaresque but you couldn't have bested
them with a rapier. The spiders thought you looked modern in
your hat.

I prefer the creatures who suffer no infancy.

A bodkin pierces the egg sack.

Sae rue na ye've come aff wi' me, I cried while the bruise on my foot
spread to my ankle.

The bridegroom sipped his Laphroaig while the maiden drank
through her teeth.

You considered this a poem rife with colloquialisms, a
landscape with no appetite for dust. The oaks have a face I
couldn't recognize though you painted them.

The oaks have been painted.

A LEG OF LAMB

Men who read Madame Blavatsky
know nothing at all about snow.
Even the orange was blacklisted
when the famine spread here.
A norange once was Persian and
the speakers misinterpreted it.
I'll serve you ice from my mint
julep cup, while you build for me
a synogogue of rain. The men,
the ones who attend my séances,
bring me water, crème fraîche, salt.

A page of Virgil chosen at random
prophesies their fate. All that's worth
saving is kept in the archives. Nothing's
worth saving, the archives have burned.

IPHIGENIA EN MASSE

There are no bones on your eyelashes
so I'll put glitter on them.

There's nothing morbid about fire
if you catch it in time. Me, I am

no archer, though I shoot off arrows.
I traffic in the fleur-de-lis.

Imagine, if you can, that a ballad
might be written by a sonneteer.

Suppose there were no dumpstering
in the sky this evening, that the sun

could dip beneath me as I caught
a burde in a bour ase beryl so bryht.

I bought a dress from the era
when perfume was called *scent*—

A spray of violets, a bolt of silk,
plus a croched version of my body.

The velvet on my fists
has never been so smooth.

TERRA INCOGNITA

It's true, there is no Walter Raleigh
to comb the dirt for gold tonight.
I've been collecting data on the fruits
of yesteryear. For me, the plums
whizz naturally, hold no congress
with the orchard as they fall.
The sky laments its pyrotechnics
because it used to be a painter.
Only since the Paleolithic has it
had so much to burn. Mankind
has eaten my fruit over the centuries
but doesn't understand metaphor.
We didn't eat plums. We wrote music.
Inevitably, we learned to speak.

THE SQUARE ROOT OF NO

To die is better than to be resurrected
the mountain said. I did whippets
and the clouds fell straight to the ground.
If student loans sit beside me, then debt
is my Beatrice. All canticles end in "stelle"
now that we're all gone. A meal of Blue
Nile lotus for the dead in Mesopotamia,
a meal of terza rima for the so-called souls
in what-we-sometimes-call paradise.
To die is better than to be beautiful,
quoth the lotuses. This is not a poem
about my husband though now that I've
said the word "husband" it has to be.

THE ANCIENTS

The stars've left no hoofprints
for the predators to follow.
I knew no way to immunize the dead.
The ancients scrawl their epitaphs
as a carriage draws past them,
as a marquee looms over them.
A virus called the hinterlands
will silence them for good.
How does the landscape profit from
my chaste and manly diction?
How many pixels will it take
to entertain the dead? The dissidents
took to the streets that morning
I kept very still, marooned
somewhere west of the prairie.
You've nothing to offer the twilight
as it molds below my equipage.
You think you're funny yet the stars
are tragicomic when they lisp.

THE ZONE

The facts as I understand them
go something like this—A thorn
is sentient when the wind despises it.
The animals were spooked
if ever there were any.
My hair's become the knight errant
in this scenario, my arm's the imp.
I'm all bling without the diaspora.
I sleep inside the lion's mouth.
It's true, I lived in a very old house
not too far from Clark Park.
The trees grew tired of anonymity
so they signed their names to the leaves.
Meadows looked like meth-
amphetamines and blossoms had no eyes
with which to see themselves, though I did.
The poem is not a field so I figured
I'd shed some light on meadows here.
A world that's elsewhere, is it built
out of images? With a modicum of speech?
For me, it come in sequences.
Not not flowers, but the vertigo of sight.
And who are the counterfeiters?
The ones who compose their work.

THE ITERATIONS

Not Cervantes, but Ángel Asturias.
A cloud sluts its way toward the sun.

The administration sold their campus
to the interested parties, the grass

kept harping on the wickedness of turf.
Me, I laid myself down and pondered

the consciousness of the stars
as they appeared in this photograph.

Not a hawk, but a goshawk's
laid to rest in my mouth.

The economic crisis was no crisis
of the stars, though an astronomer

could have predicted it. While I gloss
the extant pages, let the blossoms

be my georgic, the spikenard my psalm.
So long as I'm here I will purchase

a bushel of apples, a smallish one,
and a well-wrought drawing of Miguel

Ángel Asturias. You never could
pronounce "oeuvre" without spitting it.

The aforementioned "it" refers to what-
ever you can see—the sun, the veins

on your hand after I've chopped it off.
In my imagination, that is.